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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses characteristics common to all Middle Eastern students with the exception of Israelis, and addresses itself to those working with Middle Eastern students on American college and university campuses. Middle Eastern students will show themselves to be highly adaptable, but they may demonstrate a formality of manner, particularly in initial social relationships, and a distrust of foreigners. Salient characteristics include respect for parents and elders, pride in one's heritage, and an attitude of fatalism conditioned by religious beliefs. Personal relationships are important and demand commitment, and the use of particular language forms, especially in formal situations, has significance. Needs particular to the Middle Eastern student include respect for his or her culture, close personal relationships or friendships, relaxed social relationships, hospitality accompanied by the offering of food, interaction with fellow Arabs, having a mentor from the same background, and having a satisfactory relationship with faculty and administration advisors. (CLK)

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cultural clues to the middle eastern student

by

orin d. parker

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CULTURAL CLUES TO THE MIDDLE EASTERN STUDENT

by

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This paper developed from a talk given by Orin D. Parker, AFME Vice President for Overseas Operations, more than seven years ago, to a regional workshop of the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs. In the intervening time, the number of students from the Middle East and North Africa coming to the United States has grown significantly. We have continued to receive requests for copies of Mr. Parker's remarks from Foreign Student Advisors and others concerned with the Middle Eastern students on American campuses. Using his talk as a basis, members of our Educational Services staff have added observations, drawing on their own accumulated experience. The result is "Cultural Clues To The Middle Eastern Student."

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" I believe, in all sincerity, that there is no substitute for direct person-to-person contacts that go deep into the heart of all the problems which invoke our common concern and capture our imagination. There is no better way to reach a profound insight of the complexity of the world we live in and grasp the immense problems we face today and are likely to encounter in the future. In the process, our opinions might differ and our views might occasionally diverge. Indeed, our culture emphasizes diversity and multiplicity as a means of reaching consensus and compatibility. What is required is not identity of viewpoints, but a genuine acceptance of each other's right to hold different opinions and entertain different ideas."

Anwar Sadat
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt

In a speech to the United States Congress
Washington, D.C.
November 5, 1975

Middle Eastern students, whether Arab or non-Arab, Muslim or Christian, share many of the same distinctive characteristics. From AFME's long experience with the area, we have selected certain characteristics that should be of particular interest to those working with Middle Eastern students on American campuses. Although descriptive primarily of Arab Muslims, they can be considered relevant to Middle Eastern students as a whole, with the exception of the Israeli student. Students from Israel, cast more from a European than a Middle Eastern cultural mold, will not necessarily reflect these patterns. However, as is true of most generalizations regarding human society, one should anticipate many exceptions to the cultural clues that follow.

Almost all who deal with foreign students in the U.S. agree that Middle Eastern students are among the most adaptable. They can become fully "Americanized" within a short time. Those who have seen them in the U.S. and in their own countries can only marvel at how differently they are able to behave in each culture. A student who has become a classic student type in the U.S. will have re-adapted within months of his return to all his own norms. As a common example, we all know of the numbers of Middle Eastern students who willingly earn their support here by waiting on tables in university dining halls or commercial restaurants - a task they would not think of doing in their own countries. Social organization in the Middle East is highly stratified; division of labor is primarily

on a class basis. Social mobility, although growing, is still difficult.

Such adaptability is not a weakness. The Middle Eastern student is not being fickle or shallow. The roots of such behavior lie within a basic characteristic of his society. Social morality prevails over personal morality; thus, concepts of right and wrong, or sin and shame, derive not from an internal determination of right and wrong, but from what is considered or discovered to be right and wrong in the world around the individual. It is self-evident that every society has its own social morality governing the functioning of the group. But the Western encouragement of an individual "conscience" which will guide a person in determining correct behavior wherever he may be is secondary in the Middle East to a social "conscience." For behavior guidelines, the individual looks to his family, his friends, his religion - the world around him. Thus, as a student in our world, the Middle Easterner observes and adapts to our way of life. On his return home, he reverts to his own ways, although not necessarily without a period of adjustment.

One cultural pattern a Middle Easterner retains wherever he may be is a certain formality of manner, particularly in initial social relationships. He comes from a culture in which formality pervades social customs and daily routines. An encounter with a friend on the street will begin with oft-used and elaborately formal words of greeting. In one sense, these formal patterns help to keep people at a distance until one really knows them; they depersonalize relationships. In another sense they reflect a respect of one person for another. The Middle Easterner is consistently polite within his own culture, even to a person he dislikes. The Koran

directs that "God loveth not the speaking ill of anyone in public." Thus, the Middle Easterner will not ordinarily "tell someone off" in public; it is just not done. And he doesn't expect someone to "tell him off," especially if that person doesn't really know him. (We are speaking here of individual relationships - not the mass media or public speeches.)

What holds true in speaking of another is equally true in writing. It would be unusual for a Middle Easterner to write down a judgement of anyone else. The most relevant example for American educators is a "letter of recommendation." A Middle Easterner will give his worst enemy a good letter of recommendation. In ten years of experience in the Middle East, in Iraq and Lebanon, I have never seen a letter of recommendation from one Arab about another that discussed any negative aspects of the person's performance or record. It is not a matter of dishonesty; on the contrary, the Middle Easterner thinks we are the ones who are wrong. Our willingness to be frank in this way and to go on record regarding the "faults" of another is to him immoral.

A third significant pattern is that the Middle Eastern student comes out of a paternalistic society. Within the family, parents' word is final. Great respect for parents and elders is expected and given. In his excellent book, The Arab World Today,[1] Morroe Berger compares the reaction of Muslims and Christians (or more broadly, Arabs and Westerners) to one of the parables of the New Testament (Matthew 21:28) in which a man asks his two sons to do some work in the vineyard. One said he would, but did not; the second said he would not, but then relented and did the work.

[1] Morroe Berger, The Arab World Today, New York: Doubleday, 1962.

The Westerner would give greater credit to the second son, while the Arab would consider the first, who showed respect for his father although he did not follow through, more admirable.

The paternalistic pattern within the family extends throughout society into a more authoritarian structure in general. In the field of education one result is an imitative rather than a creative system. Products of the system have learned primarily by memorization and imitation rather than by independent research and original work. Moreover, the individual student's academic choices will often reflect his father's desires rather than his own wishes or capabilities. One should not assume, however, that this pattern of career selection decision-making, which contrasts so sharply with our own emphasis on individual choice and fulfillment, necessarily produces unhappy people, although, of course, in some cases it does.

Hostility and suspicion may well be characteristics of the Middle Eastern student when he first arrives in the U.S. Distrust of the foreigner runs deep in his part of the world, whose history reflects endless wars (internal and external), invasions and occupations. In addition, the region has generated three of the world's major religions; in recent centuries, Western missionary movements have returned to the Middle East in force. There have been many major benefits to the peoples, particularly in terms of medical and educational development, but for some in an area predominantly Muslim, the missionary movement has increased suspicion of the West.

This suspicion can show up in matters so seemingly simple to us as completing a university application form. We have had a student argue for

more than an hour over why he should enter the name of his mother on such a form. Any information not absolutely relevant and essential to him should not be revealed. Anthropologists doing research in the Middle East quickly learn standard Western questionnaire techniques do not work. Anyone coming into a community and asking questions may well be a spy to the Middle Easterner and is to be avoided. One American researcher in Egypt wanted to conduct a survey that solicited opinions on a certain subject as well as facts. He constructed his form so that the factual information was solicited first and the opinions second. To the second section he added an explanation of the need for the opinions, since in his experience anyone will give facts, but many will not give opinions without understanding the legitimate reasons for soliciting them. His Egyptian colleague looked it over and suggested he reverse the order and put his explanations with the section soliciting facts; Arabs will easily give opinions, but facts are only reluctantly divulged.

Middle Easterners have a tremendous pride in their heritage, in their historical, cultural and religious contributions to the world. They have as well increasing pride in their contemporary societies and their capabilities to operate as equals with other nations on the world scene. Most students arrive in the U.S. with great self-confidence; it can be a shock when they do not encounter among their new American acquaintances any great awareness of their part of the world and its significance. They are sensitive to what people know of their world and what they think of it; they want an opportunity to share and be heard.

Of particular surprise to the Middle Eastern student will be to encounter ignorance of Islam and to find himself considered an unbeliever. The religion of Islam has predominated in the Arab Middle East for centuries and continues to do so today.* Any attempt to define Arab "culture" must recognize Islam as its foundation. Even those who no longer observe all its tenets remain loyal to its basic concepts and give Islam its proper respect. Within Islam, Christians and Jews have held from the beginning a special place of respect as "People of the Book" - worshippers of the same God and sharers in the same early religious heritage. Muslims consider their religion to be the final culmination of a religious development process, from Judaism to Christianity to Islam. Prophets of the Old Testament are recognized as Prophets within Islam; Christ is so recognized as well. Thus, it is totally surprising for a Middle Easterner to find himself considered outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

His religious heritage goes far to explain the Middle Eastern student's attitude of fatalism to events in his life and in society around him. Within his culture God is known as truly omnipotent; all things happen as God wills. Most of us know the phrase, "Inshallah" or "God Willing;" to many Americans this seems suspiciously like "manana" or "some day." But it is not nearly so simple. In one of our field offices, the newly-arrived American director found every instruction to his assistant acknowledged with "Inshallah." Finally, one day the director said that when he gave an instruction he expected the assistant to carry it out and not reply "Inshallah." The assistant responded that the instructions would be carried out,

* This is not to ignore the many non-Islamic minority groups within the Arab world; they all function, however, within a pervasive Islamic ambiance.

but that they, like everything else in life, occurred only if God is willing. One does not question the will of God.

Personal relationships are extremely important to the Middle Easterner. For them the important thing in life is people - family and freindships. They observe our rush to experience everything, and to acquire everything, as laying waste to the truly important matters of life. "Haste is of the devil," says the Koran. They see us as sacrificing people for things. To his two or three good friends, the Middle Easterner will give generously of himself and his time. On each side there will be a sense of affection, of closeness, and of mutual obligation to each other in time of need. Our American friendships, quickly formed and sometimes as quickly ended, appear shallow and uncommitted to him.

In the Middle East friendships will commonly be between those of the same sex. In the U.S. the Middle Eastern male student may develop his friendships from among his female fellow students. This is not only because of the wider possibilities for female friendship that he finds here (although the opportunity to get to know women both personally and as fellow students is not to be ignored), but may also be due to an inability to find among American male friends any willing to assume so close a tie as the Middle Easterner feels true friendship requires.

It might be noted here that much initial confusion can be anticipated on behalf of the Middle Eastern student as he enters into male/female relationships in general in the U.S. His own society remains male-dominated; although such influences as education and urbanization are having their

effects, women in general take a secondary role. Relationships between men and women are surrounded with restrictions. Our more free and easy relationships between young men and women often lead the newly-arrived Middle Easterner to unfortunate mis-interpretations. We should perhaps be even more aware of the pitfalls facing a young Middle Eastern woman coming here. She is unfamiliar with the life-style of young American women and unprepared for the behavioral expectations her fellow students, both male and female, will have of her. An American date will raise for her a host of behavioral unknowns.

One cannot survey common characteristics of Middle Easterners without noting the significance of language in their lives. We have already noted how even a casual encounter may be surrounded with formal and specific words of greeting and departure. Proverbs and verses of the Koran are common in conversation and writing. Among traditional Islamic "sciences" one finds philology, rhetoric and criticism, lexicography, grammar, literature and poetry. Arabs are in love with language. Men gather in coffee shops to listen for hours to a poetry recital. Important events are noted in speeches, songs, poems. In everyday life it becomes almost as important how one says something as what one says. Words carry a weight and importance of their own. To talk, to listen, to share words is important to the Arab.

* * *

With these cultural characteristics in mind, we might look then at some of the Middle Eastern student's needs during his education in the U.S. Based on our experience, we suggest the following:

First, he needs respect - for himself and his people, for his country and its customs, for his religion. He is not unique in responding warmly to those with genuine interest in him as a person and in learning from him as well as teaching him about his new life here. Such matters as matching the arriving Arab student with an American room-mate can be fraught with hazards if the American brings into the experience nothing more than a general willingness to share a room with a foreigner. One of our students was sure his American room-mate hated him. Every night when they were studying, the American put his feet up on his desk, soles pointing directly at his Arab room-mate. In most Arab countries to do so is an insult - the worst kind of insult. Eventually a real friendship developed between the two, but many early mis-understandings could have been avoided if the American room-mate had been better prepared to be sensitive to his new friend's reactions and to create an atmosphere in which his friend could begin to feel free to share his feelings.

Secondly, he needs a close personal relationship or friendship. Those universities with well-established host family programs can use this possible channel. American room-mates may be an answer, but only if those Americans participating are well-prepared to make the extra effort required to give this kind of exchange a chance of success. On almost any campus students interested in this kind of "out-reach" can be found; if they cannot be utilized in room-mate situations, they can be drawn into other kinds of interaction activities.

Thirdly, he needs relaxed social relationships. Opportunities to join with families or other groups of students in an informal way, where there is time to relax, to talk, to listen and to share, can do much to help him feel at home. If one remembers the ever-present coffee shop, found on nearly every street corner in his own world, one can feel instantly the kind of informal human exchange he will miss in ours.

Thinking again of the coffee shop, we should become sensitive to the Middle Easterner's need for food and hospitality. In the Middle East, like mosques and minarets, they go together. It is unheard of to visit anyone, including a business visit in an office, without being offered some kind of refreshment. It is a shock for a Middle Eastern student to visit someone even for an hour or so and not have refreshments offered, be it only a cup of coffee or a soft drink. To him, hospitality without food is not complete. Its significance can be noted by the care with which food is prepared and presented. For some Middle Easterners the assembly-line atmosphere of a U.S. cafeteria can be as much of a shock as the food itself.

Implicit in some of the needs already suggested is a need for conversation. His daily diet of good, concerned conversation may be almost as difficult for him to find here as good rice and good bread. In his new bi-lingual world in the U.S., he needs plenty of opportunity to use his English outside the classroom. But he also needs to hear his own language and to share conversation with other Arab students. It can be a mistake to have a "ghetto" of Arab students, or any other national group, living together on a campus, but still, the Arab students need to get together and stay in touch with their language and culture.

In a different context his reliance on oral communication means that for the Middle Eastern student a ten-minute conversation face-to-face with his advisor, discussing his paper, will mean more to him than a two-page written analysis of his work.

The newly-arrived student in particular has a need for a mentor from his own culture. He is no different from others in finding that the experience of a "big brother," someone who has already gone through much of what he is encountering, can be a tremendous support. With the numbers of Middle Eastern students now on U.S. campuses, the new student takes care of this on his own, but it is useful to be aware of this need.

With his faculty and administration advisors, he needs a paternal relationship. He expects to look up to his advisors and professors and to receive strong guidance, even control, from them initially. With acclimation he will work well within our more fraternal sets of relationships, but initially, he will thrive better under a more disciplined situation.

And finally, he needs to have his good deeds repaid and to have an opportunity to repay you. There is an Arab saying, "Please don't be grateful, you will repay me." It is not intended to be self-serving but to reflect that exchange of consideration and obligation that the Middle Easterner sees implicit in friendship. He expects a favor in return for the favor he does for you, and he expects to be able to repay you when you do a favor for him. Give him that chance.

* * *

At the outset we suggested many exceptions could be found to the observations we have made. Perhaps one final "clue" might be offered and that is to avoid looking at the Arab World as a homogeneous mass from Morocco to Arabia. There are Mediterranean and mountain peoples as well as Bedouin; there are Christians, Zoroastrians and other religious groups as well as Muslims; there are the city-dwellers, the farmers and the nomads. Its ethnic mosaic is rich, from Berbers and Tuaregs in the West, to the Nubians of Upper Egypt, to Armenians and Kurds in the East. While seeking the commonality among them, the variations must not be forgotten.

An awareness of the Middle Eastern student's general cultural characteristics and a sympathy with his needs while living here does not erase the fact that the major burden of the adjustment has to be done by the student himself. As with all foreign students, he must sort out our "cultural clues," adapt himself to our ways and pursue his education on our terms. He is prepared to do this; on our part, a heightened sensitivity to his cultural background can ease his transition.

Within the Middle East there is a high regard for learning. The Koran says, "The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr." Qualified Middle Eastern students have already established a very good record at American colleges and universities. The numbers are steadily increasing. We offer these "clues" in the hope that they will aid both students and their advisors in achieving their common goal - a satisfying educational experience.

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